Diana Giese looks into the National Library’s rich A.J. Campbell Collection, testimony to a man who loved Australia’s birds and wild places.

Along this back track we proceeded through a quiet forest of principally eucalypts and forest oak or beefwood … until we came to what is locally known as the old saw-mill. Here we turned off to a track leading up into the mountain, and as we ascended so our path became more enchanting. It took a dip into a dark gully, up which we proceeded slowly. A rippling perennial stream trickled over its rocky bed. At times we were hemmed in with great vertical masses of rock and earth, from which hung pendant ferns and tree orchids, the latter in white blooms of strong fragrance, while towering overhead were majestic pines, whose whorled, mast-like stems contended in lofty grandeur with the surrounding eucalypts … We discovered a large, silent, transparent pool, deep as a house, excavated by nature in the bed of a gorge.

In 1886, A.J. Campbell published ‘A Naturalist’s Camp in Northern Queensland’ in *The Australasian* for which, with *The Naturalist* and *The Emu*, he was to write regularly over many years. Here he revels in the lush richness of Mount Macalister, behind Cardwell in north Queensland, documenting this journey, as so many others, with a fresh and delighted eye.

Remembered principally as a ‘bird-man’, ‘one of the grand old men of Australian ornithology’, Campbell first encountered the wild in his early childhood. Born in 1853, he spent his first 10 years with his grandparents on the Werribee River. As an adult, from his Victorian base, he travelled all over the mainland and the islands off the coasts of north-eastern, western…
and southern Australia, and those of Bass Strait. In the 1890s, he often roamed the Dandenong Ranges east of Melbourne, bringing back photographs of original eucalypts and moist, fern-clad gullies. He wrote about and photographed a countryside and ecology that in some places no longer exist.

The National Library holds a rich collection of Campbell's life work. There are his pioneering photographs; notes, corrected proofs and journal articles; correspondence and books; diaries and drawings. Delving into them reveals a man with passions pursued diligently throughout an active life. He collected specimens, including birds' eggs and nests, 'for the advancement of science', and meticulously documented his work. In 1883, he produced a manual on nests and eggs, and in 1900, published *Nests and Eggs of Australian Birds*, which has become the standard work in the field.

He was keen to share his enthusiasms. In 1901, he suggested to 20 dinner guests at his South Yarra home that they form an association of like-minded people. This became the Royal Australasian Ornithologists' Union, of which he was twice president. Members collected material on the habits and lives of Australian birds, something that even then was recognised as urgent. The prospectus for *Nests and Eggs of Australian Birds* contains the following, from Professor Alfred Newton, head of Cambridge's Zoology and Comparative Anatomy department:

None of us know so much as we ought of the habits and mode of life of Australian birds, and it is as certain as anything can be that if this knowledge is not attained quickly it will never be attained at all. As the various colonies become more and more thickly peopled, and the land settled, the native birds will gradually become rarer, and some of them will undoubtedly become extinct.

Each issue of the union's journal, *The Emu*, contains bird lists compiled by members in their own districts. The aim was nothing less than a complete census and map of the distribution of Australian birds. This was closely linked to something we now find rather disturbing: the indefatigable collection of nests and eggs, often whole clutches. Further, potential specimens were unceremoniously shot. Such collecting was a well-accepted part of the scientific culture of the time. In the Campbell Collection are letters, including one from the National Museum in 1915 acknowledging a donation and expressing 'hearty appreciation' for his 'complete and valuable collection of the Eggs of our Native Birds, which you acquired at the expenditure of an infinite amount of time, trouble and expense'.

Archibald James Campbell (1832–1921) *Unidentified Group of Men at Camp Site, Sea Elephant River, King Island, Tasmania* (between 1870 and 1929) sepia toned photograph; 15.5 x 20.3 cm image; 20.0 x 25.2 cm mounted Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an24830091
Campbell was for many years an active member of the Field Naturalists' Club of Victoria. He was made an honorary member of the Zoological Society of New South Wales, and had honorary links with ornithologists' unions in Britain and the United States.

Another life-long preoccupation was the promotion of wattle as Australia's national emblem. Inspired by the rose of England, the thistle of Scotland and the shamrock of Ireland, he conducted a determined campaign to have wattle elevated to a similar status.

In August 1909, a committee at Sydney's Botanic Gardens proposed a day celebrating what was already referred to as Australia's 'national flower'. It recommended that wattle should be worn, displayed and planted throughout the Commonwealth. The 'wattle river', it was noted, rises in Queensland in May, 'flows in foaming golden crest on crest' through New South Wales in June and July, by August and September is flourishing in Victoria, and reaches Tasmania in the final three months of every year.

In September 1910, the first Wattle Day was celebrated. A clipping from *The Argus*, Melbourne, describes how florists arranged special displays, and other shops festooned their windows with blooms. People wore sprigs of wattle in their buttonholes, patients in the Home for Incurables in Adelaide were presented with sprays of flowers, and trees were planted in gardens.

Support gathered fast. In a 1911 flyer from the Wattle Day League and the Royal Horticultural Society of Victoria, a Wild Wattle Show was advertised at Melbourne Town Hall. It was explained that 'the glorious golden flowers of the acacias are typically Australian, because, of the 500 species known in botany, four-fifths are found in the various States of the Commonwealth.' Ideas burgeoned. There were songs, banners, the Wattle Train, and stamps bursting into bloom.

Wattle Day material epitomises the heady nationalistic fervour of those post-Federation, pre-World War 1 days. Draft promotional brochures for the league assert that 'to the Australian nothing would more surely carry him in thought to the free sunny sky, the eucalyptus covered hill-side with its rushing torrents, as a whiff of wattle'. Miss Agnes L. Storrie (NSW Branch) wrote that 'to the native-born Australian the wattle stands for home, country, kindred, sunshine and love—every instinct that the heart most deeply enshrines'.

Later, the flower was to become even more intertwined with growing Australian nationalism. Reviews of *Golden Wattle*, the book that Campbell compiled, are pasted into an album in the Library's Collection. They are preceded by his note speaking of emotions aroused in a soldier by the smell of wattle during a Boer War battle, and the sprig of wattle from his mother described in a poem by a soldier at Gallipoli. *Golden Wattle*, 'a compendium of knowledge, botanic, topographic, historic and aesthetic', with its 30 full-page photographs of acacias in flower and 'scenes of wattle wilds', was described by the Brisbane *Daily Mail* of 24 September 1921, as 'Mr Campbell's latest contribution to the patriotic movement'. By 1922, an illustrated lecture given by Campbell is reported: 'One of his pictures was so attractive that it was used extensively in England in poster form to encourage emigration to Australia.'

Behind the sentiment and the celebration, there was an embryonic environmental consciousness among the wattle enthusiasts. Humankind and other species were part of the patterns of nature, they believed.
Planting of wattle in private gardens, on parade grounds and in parks was constantly encouraged. It was noted how many species ‘took kindly to cultivation’ and flowered freely, ‘while few trees require less attention’. A 1927 petition with Campbell as one of the signatories, says that an object of the Australian Wattle League is the planting and conservation of wattles ‘for practical purposes’. By the 1930s and 1940s, there were wildflower sanctuaries in places such as Frankston and Croydon in Victoria. By 1955, the Honorary Secretary of the Wattle League was inviting people to a planting of 40 wattles in memory of Campbell’s work in National Parks. Mount Buffalo was specifically mentioned. It was observed how it was being damaged ‘by the grazing of cattle, with its destructive method of the fire-stick and the unchecked roaming cattle eating down unique alpine flora’. It said that the five different species of wattle growing in the area were to be found nowhere else in Victoria.

Throughout his life, Campbell inspired people to follow his example. After his death, E.A. D’Ombrain, who had accompanied him on field trips from childhood, wrote that to ‘tramp in the country with [him] meant a very strenuous time. With a long swinging stride and a tireless energy which would permit of scarcely any rest, his keen eyesight, and an uncanny, almost instinctive faculty of where to look for a nest, all made for a pleasantly tiring day.’

The Campbell Collection was donated to the National Library by Campbell’s grandson, Ian Campbell. As well as ornithological and natural history material, it contains Scottish diaries and accounts of his voyage to Australia by A.J. Campbell senior, with drawings and photographs of contemporary Scotland and Australia. These provide interesting material for researchers on Scottish family settlement in Victoria.

In the collection there are also papers relating to a 1921 book proposal by Campbell, for a work to be titled ‘Through Forest, Field and Flood or Australian Bush Travels’. It was never published. Ian Campbell notes with pride, however, that 80 years later, there is recognition of A.J. Campbell’s pioneering conservation achievements in publications such as Tom Griffiths’ Forests of Ash—An Environmental History (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

In his presidential address of 9 October 1929, at the Congress of the Ornithologists’ Union, one of Campbell’s last public statements, he looked forward to the preoccupations of a much later time. He observed that recent papers on birds ‘naturally bring in descriptions of the country which the birds inhabit, the flora, the bird-life and often geology going hand in hand ... Ecology is the “home” surroundings of any particular form of life, and the information so collected is as much part of the picture as descriptions of the birds, their nests and eggs, or habits would be.’ Campbell understood at a deeply felt level that the ‘home’ of Australians was our land. The thrust of his life was towards documenting and expressing this, in prose reflecting a mixture of romantic love of nature, and a strong religious faith: ‘O Lord, how manifold are Thy works; in wisdom hast Thou made them all. The earth is full of Thy riches.’


DIANA GIESE contributes regularly to the National Library’s collections and to National Library of Australia News.